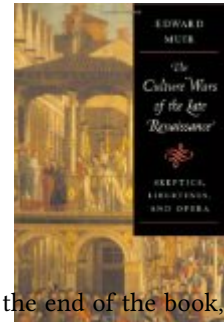


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Edward Muir. *The Culture Wars of the Late Renaissance: Skeptics, Libertines, and Opera*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007. xiii + 173 pp. \$27.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-02481-6.

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Some years ago, Lorenzo Bianconi wondered whether the birth of opera should be placed in 1600 or 1637. The former is the year of the performance of Ottavio Rinuccini's *Euridice* at the Medici court in Florence, the earliest opera for which the complete score survives (actually, two complete scores by Jacopo Peri and Giulio Caccini). The latter is the year of the first public, commercially based opera, produced in Venice, at the Teatro San Cassiano, by a company of musicians run by Benedetto Ferrari and Francesco Manelli. This distinction has significant historiographical implications, since it was its second, Venetian birth that allowed opera to transcend the magnificent but ephemeral life of court entertainment to become the social phenomenon that we all know. Edward Muir's *The Culture Wars of the Late Renaissance* originated in the wake of a similar question, reoriented toward the geography of public opera: why Venice? However, as explained in the preface, the three essays comprising this book—the first publication of the Bernard Berenson Lectures on the Italian Renaissance sponsored by Villa I Tatti, the Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies in Florence—developed into a broader analysis of the ideological conflicts that characterized Venetian civic life at the beginning of the seventeenth century.

These are the culture wars evoked in the title. The plural “wars” is warranted by the complexity of the issues at stake: education, the relationship between state and church, women’s role in society, the institution of marriage, and sexual politics. The main forces involved in the battle were only two: the Society of Jesus and the Republic of Venice. The book begins in the spring of 1591, with the students of the University of Padua protesting against the Jesuit college. The Jesuits were banned from Venice in 1606, following the papal inter-

dict against Venice. They return at the end of the book, in 1657, when Venice was forced to seek papal support against the Turks. Muir stresses the importance of this period of intellectual freedom (i.e., freedom from the repressive action of the Jesuits) as a precondition for the development of opera in Venice. While opera took root in the Jesuits’ absence, the active force behind its social, if not financial, success was the progressive libertinism cultivated by an important segment of Venetian aristocracy under the auspices of the Accademia degli Incogniti. Muir’s thesis is that understanding the complex intellectual dynamics linking the culture wars against the Society of Jesus and the philosophical tradition that reached the Venetian patriciate from the University of Padua is crucial to an understanding of opera as well. “The banishment of the Jesuits Order had created opportunities for two generations of seriously playful, mostly young intellectuals, some of whom had libertine inclinations, and it was these nobles and their foreign friends who promoted and supported early Venetian opera” (p. 131).

As summarized in the second part of the title, the book tracks and analyzes the progress from skeptics to libertines and from libertines to opera producers. The skeptic is Cesare Cremonini, professor of natural philosophy at the University of Padua from 1591 to 1631. The libertine is Ferrante Pallavicino, the enfant terrible of the anti-Roman movement, whose satirical works against the church in general and the Barberini family in particular eventually led to his capture and execution in Avignon in 1644. In Muir’s narrative, they both have a sort of intellectual counterpart, a symbolic alter ego underscoring patterns of resemblance and difference: Galileo Galilei for Cremonini and Arcangela Tarabotti for Pallavicino.

In the first chapter, Muir follows Cremonini’s defense

of the anti-Jesuits students, starting with the oration that Cremonini delivered before the doge. The rivalry between the Jesuit college and the university betrayed a deeper clash of ideas. The real issue was a different conception of education, which, in turn, reflected a different conception of knowledge. While chronicling the “pedagogical battles” waged in Padua, Muir offers a compelling sketch of Cremonini’s brand of Aristotelianism, of his view on the nature of human knowledge, the relationship between logic and experience, and the immortality of the soul as the problem that most attracted the Inquisition’s attention. This was the same Aristotelian faith in the name of which Cremonini refused to look into Galilei’s telescope. But this episode, however famous and emblematic, should not obscure the fact that in Padua Cremonini fought on the same side as Galilei. If anything, his ideas had further reaching implications: “The Inquisition judged Galileo the heretic, and history has judged Cremonini the loser. But Cremonini was certainly the more dangerous in his heresies” (p. 53).

Muir’s interest in Cremonini is not a mere historiographical hagiography of religious skepticism and freedom of thought. His goal is to show the intellectual continuity between Cremonini’s philosophical legacy and the generation of young libertines who set the tone of the cultural life in Venice in the first half of the seventeenth century. More than any specific aspect of his interpretation of Aristotle, Cremonini bequeathed an “intellectual style,” which, once transferred outside the institutional confines of the university, shaped the somewhat extravagant, and at times plainly outrageous, literary and theatrical activity of the Venetian libertines sponsored by the Accademia degli Incogniti (p. 56). Pallavicino is their representative in the book’s second essay.

Pallavicino’s flamboyant literary career and violent demise are known. Muir uses them to introduce two important features of Venetian libertinism (or proto-Enlightenment, as, to some extent, he would prefer to call it). They both play a central role in the chapter on opera. The first feature is a distrust of the power of representation of language, which translated into a distinctive rhetoric of moral and ethical subversion (the legacy of Cremonini’s materialism). The results are readily apparent in the Incogniti’s cultivation of a literature that celebrated the paradoxical, extravagant, witty, and bizarre. In their turn, stylistic playfulness and ambiguity acted as a screen, shielding anything that could be interpreted as morally or politically offensive from the incriminating logic of language. And, this was in line with Cremonini’s personal motto: “Intus ut libet, foris ut moris

est” (In private [think] what you wish; in public, what is the custom) (p. 56). The second point is the centrality of marriage and sexuality in the Incogniti’s agenda. It is in this context that Muir introduces the figure of Suor Arcangela Tarabotti, along with the array of contradictions that characterized her liaison with the Accademia degli Incogniti, at once an ally and an enemy. No matter how progressive in their libertine view on sexuality, the Incogniti could be equally conservative in their attitude toward patriarchy, marriage, and forced monachization.

The marriage practices of early seventeenth-century Venice, which amounted to a “demographic suicide” of the aristocracy, inform a large part of Muir’s discussion of opera, centered, in the third essay, on Claudio Monteverdi’s *L’incoronazione di Poppea* (1642-43) (p. 107). The libretto, signed by the Incognito Giovanni Francesco Busenello, offers enough conceits of immorality to satisfy even the most uninhibited reader, whether early modern or modern. As such, it has been at the center of an intense scholarly debate seeking to clarify the correct historical interpretation of its social and moral message. Muir reads *Poppea* against the backdrop of the nobility’s demographic suicide, linking together the Incogniti’s preoccupation with sexuality, the matrimonial crisis of the period, and the Venetian synthesis of theater and carnival traditions to show how opera became the ideal medium through which to provide “a commentary on the harsh divorce between marriage and sexuality” (p. 121).

In a way, Muir argues, this seemingly unusual amalgam was nothing new. The fusion of theater, sexuality, and carnival had a long history in Venice. But, thanks to the temporary absence of the watchful eye of the Society of Jesus, the free spirits, in Nietzsche’s words, ran riot. There is, indeed, something Nietzschean in Muir’s celebration of this period of Venetian history, of its excesses and achievements alike. It is not surprising that his concluding remarks on the demise of the Incogniti takes on a tinge of melancholy.

The book retains the agile format of the lectures from which it originated. But this does not detract from its scholarly charm and strength. Muir pursues several important leads, new and old. His ability to weave together seemingly distant cultural phenomena and disciplinary fields makes this slim volume one of the most pleasantly concise, insightful, and readable introductions to the Venetian libertine culture of the early seventeenth century. Somewhat counterintuitively, Muir believes that the answer to the question of the success of opera in Venice “is not to be found so much in the aesthetics of

operatic music, no matter how great the compositions of Monteverdi, Francesco Cavalli, and the other masters of the formative operatic period” (p. 123). Much more could be said about the unique role of music in delineating alternative spaces of representation (alternative to the realism of spoken theater), in evoking specific traditions of vocal communication, in authorizing the suspension of the norms of decorum, and in making the emotionally irrational believable. To be sure, Muir is more sen-

sitive to these issues than he is willing to declare. Valuable insights into the multifarious meanings of the musicality of this theater emerge, for example, from his perceptive discussion of the “bacchanalian behavior of the Venetian carnival,” and of the social practice of dissimulation (p. 125). In the end, one is left with the impression that the theater of the seventeenth-century Venetian libertines could not but be musical.

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